There is an opportunity for a significant shift in how the nation thinks about homelessness. Many communities around the country are moving to a system that places much greater emphasis on housing stability. This paper provides basic steps for using HUD's Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) to facilitate this transformation of homeless assistance. Although no community has perfected homeless assistance, these steps have been used in communities to spark the process of transformation.

The transformation to a housing stability approach builds on research and successful community practices, which demonstrate that focusing resources on quickly stabilizing people in housing diminishes the chaos in their lives and enables programs to address their clients' longer-term services needs. While shelter is a critical form of emergency assistance, it should only be used for crisis. Focusing on housing stability affords greater opportunity for the homelessness assistance and mainstream systems to succeed.

Making housing stability the center of a homelessness system helps bring other mainstream resources to bear, including benefits and cash assistance, supportive services, housing assistance, health care, job training, and food and nutrition services. This emphasis helps spread the responsibility of preventing and ending homelessness across the community, and not just leaving it as the charge of homelessness assistance providers and shelters.

HPRP provides a tremendous opportunity to facilitate this transformation and make lasting improvements to homelessness assistance systems. Communities are already planning how they can use HPRP to implement best practices, build infrastructure, and take a housing stability-oriented approach to addressing homelessness.

Although the funding is a one-time allocation, adopting the strategies described below can increase the sustainability of the programs created by HPRP. Mainstream resources from housing agencies, income and benefits programs, and service providers have the potential, over time, to shoulder more of the burden of stabilizing housing and addressing the service needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The increased effectiveness that your community will be able to demonstrate can help build political will for more resources locally and nationally. The strategies below can increase the effectiveness of your system and provide your community with leverage to receive further supports.

Transforming your system to one based on housing stability can seem to be a daunting, abstract task. However, taking the seven steps in this paper can have a transformative impact on homelessness in your community. Each item has already helped reduce homelessness in communities across the country. The Alliance and other organizations are developing additional materials to help implement these and other strategies.

1. *Create a uniform process for targeting assistance that assesses risk of homelessness, assesses strengths and barriers to stable, permanent housing, and prioritizes interventions.*

   Currently, most communities have fragmented systems of determining what kind of assistance people will receive when they become homeless. Much depends on where a person initially seeks help, which programs have open slots, and the specific eligibility criteria of different programs. Fragmentation leads to inefficiency, because people with the highest level of need do not necessarily get directed to the most intensive programs, or those programs end up with longer waiting lists.

   Communities with effective prevention systems generally have a coordinated process for determining who will receive assistance and what kinds of assistance they will receive. Simple tools are used across the entire system to:

   - Assess the risk of homelessness for people in precarious housing situations;
   - Assess immediate barriers to stable housing for people who are homeless or at high risk; and
   - Prioritize interventions depending on need.

   The assessments are based on known protective and risk factors, such as support networks, deep poverty, domestic violence, disability, and employment history. Each intake location and program uses the same assessment process, so that individuals and families are likely to receive the same intervention, no matter where they present. While not 100 percent effective at preventing homelessness or determining an appropriate intervention, they can greatly improve targeting and outcomes.

   Interventions are prioritized based on risk and cost. People with a low risk of homelessness and fewer barriers to housing stability receive less intensive interventions, while people with higher risk and more barriers receive more intensive ones. Most importantly, all of the assessment and targeting processes are continuously updated based on outcomes data, including information about who becomes homeless in the community and what interventions are successful at preventing or ending homelessness.

2. *Create a common set of performance measures for programs.*

   Prioritizing and deciding on primary outcomes will help funnel finite resources into activities that will best achieve these goals. Successful communities tend to prioritize a small number of important outcomes that are used across programs, such as:

   - Reducing the length of stay in shelter or in homelessness;
   - Reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness for the first time;
   - Increasing the number of people who are diverted from shelter to stable housing;
   - Reducing repeat episodes of homelessness;
   - Reducing the number of people overall who are homeless.

   More measures of process and outcomes may be included, but the factors noted above are critically important for communities to discuss. These outcomes may be measured even for programs that do not primarily contribute to a specific outcome. For example, emergency shelters primarily keep people experiencing homelessness safe. However, by measuring length of stay in homelessness for residents of shelters, a performance

measurement system can increase a shelter's coordination with rapid re-housing programs.

3. *Create a system of oversight that encourages better outcomes, including:*
   - *Regular assessments of individual program performance;*
   - *Performance-based funding and contracts; and*
   - *Regular reporting of system-wide performance and return on investment.*

Successful homelessness assistance systems usually have performance expectations that are clear and precise about how performance will be measured. Transparency and communication are critical, so that program staff understand expectations and manage their programs appropriately to achieve the desired results. By setting up such a system, community measurement can drive better community performance. Successful communities tend to assess and communicate results at least quarterly. Technical assistance is then targeted to less successful programs.

Successful communities often base program funding in part on performance. For example, some portion of providers' reimbursements may be contingent on their meeting certain performance benchmarks. As such a system evolves, providers can be given more flexibility over the use of their funding, provided that they continue to achieve positive outcomes, allowing them to focus more of their resources and creativity on achieving results.

System-wide performance information can generate political will and drive funding decisions made by political leaders. Political momentum can be generated by regularly reporting on the effectiveness of homelessness assistance and ensuring that the public is fully aware of the impact of funding decisions, both positive and negative, made by political leaders. Regularly measuring performance is an effective way to do this. Connecting performance to funding decisions will also ensure that funding goes to those programs that have the biggest impact. Ideally, such a system can report on the return on investment by funders. Given that HPRP represents only a one-time infusion of federal resources, increasing political buy-in will be particularly important so that communities can leverage their success to obtain other funds.

4. *Coordinate homelessness assistance with mainstream resources.*

Putting emergency shelter at the center of the homelessness assistance system generally encourages mainstream systems to turn to the homelessness assistance system to meet the needs of their most challenging clients. For example, the Medicaid system may fail to serve someone, allowing them to fall into homelessness and receive case management through the homelessness assistance system. Mainstream systems and homelessness systems each have a role to play: homelessness systems for crisis intervention and mainstream systems for treatment and ongoing support. Communities should instead define the roles and responsibilities of mainstream and homelessness assistance systems. Roles might include the following:

Homelessness Assistance:
- Shelter people who become homeless;
- Provide rapid re-housing assistance for people who become homeless and are categorically ineligible for public benefits;
- Provide homelessness prevention, including short-term assistance for rent, utilities, or other housing costs for people who are categorically ineligible for public benefits;

- Provide street outreach and nutrition to people who are homeless.

Mainstream Systems:
- *PHAs and Housing Agencies*: Provide long-term subsidies to people at highest risk of becoming or remaining homelessness;
- *TANF Agencies*: Assess families for risk of homelessness and offer resources to providers to do homelessness prevention and re-housing assistance for families with children;
- *Mental Health and Public Health Agencies*: Provide services in permanent supportive housing for people who are unable to maintain housing even with a subsidy because of a disability;
- *VA*: Assess veterans for risk of homelessness and offer resources to providers to do homelessness prevention for veterans;
- *Corrections*: Perform effective discharge planning to identify stable housing situations upon discharge and offer resources for providers to re-house people who do not have stable housing upon exit;
- *Employment Agencies*: Prioritize employment assistance to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

A key challenge to better coordination is helping mainstream systems recognize the extent to which the people they serve become homeless and to which homelessness among their clientele undermines the ability of the mainstream systems to achieve their goals. Another challenge is to incentivize mainstream systems properly, so that they prevent homelessness for their most challenging clients.

5. *Understand your system.*

   Understanding the costs and savings of different programs within your homelessness assistance system can be extremely illuminating and help drive change.

   - Know the per-person cost of every intervention and who bears the cost;
   - Know how much every intervention saves and to whom the savings go.

   Having this information can help your system utilize the most cost-effective interventions. It can also strengthen long-term planning to end homelessness by quantifying the needed resources.

6. *Build capacity to address emergency housing needs, including the imminent loss of housing (prevention) or homelessness (rapid re-housing), using best practices.*

   To end homelessness, communities will want to build their capacity to provide targeted and effective homelessness prevention and to provide rapid re-housing to people who become homeless. The scale of these programs can be matched to the need in the community, based on local HMIS, surveys, and other data about need. In some cases, existing prevention and homelessness assistance programs can take on new responsibilities. In other cases, new programs may have to be created. In addition to expanding programs, increasing the skills of program staff will improve the impact of prevention and rapid re-housing programs. The opportunity provided by HPRP can be used to ensure that whatever programs are funded employ data-driven, cost-effective strategies.

An effective system includes community-based prevention, shelter diversion, and rapid re-housing. All of these programs should aim to:

- Provide just enough assistance (and no more) to help a person stabilize their current housing situation or move to more stable housing;
- Connect people to other community resources to meet their needs for employment, public assistance, education, and other services.

The best community-based prevention programs also:

- Utilize partnerships with providers, agencies, community leaders, and other entities that interact with people who may be at risk of homelessness;
- Prioritize people who are most likely to become homeless based on local HMIS or other data, or if no local data is available, risk factors used by similar communities;
- Constantly improve performance by reviewing shelter admission data to see who was served but still became homeless and who was not served and became homeless.

The best shelter diversion programs also:

- Screen everyone who requests shelter to see if they can be diverted to stable housing.

The best rapid re-housing programs also:

- Quickly assess people's immediate barriers to housing;
- Utilize partnerships with community organizations to locate housing.

7. Encourage and cultivate leadership.

Communities that have already made strides in transforming their homelessness assistance system have had strong leadership. Change is always difficult, and there are continually new obstacles in its path. However, when a community has one or more seemingly tireless leaders pushing for systems reform and implementation of best practices and building political will and financing, momentum can develop over time. Community leaders know how to organize and energize efforts, bring uniformity to vision, and focus resources to create the essential levers to promote lasting change.

HPRP provides a tremendous opportunity to help prevent a surge of homelessness from the current economic crisis and to make lasting improvements to homelessness assistance systems.

The Alliance will continue to create resources to help communities fully utilize the opportunities presented by HPRP. These resources will be posted on the website below.

www.endhomelessness.org/section/prevention